

A shaman's burial from an Early Classic cave in the Maya Mountains of Belize, Central America

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Abstract

For the ancient Maya caves were fundamentally important locations in a sacred landscape linked to ancestors, creation myths and forces that animate the universe. Investigations in the Maya Mountains in southern Belize recovered data from a burial cave that contained the decapitated remains of a male sealed behind a masonry wall in a remote region away from any known pre-Columbian settlements. The deceased had been treated reverentially and was accompanied by a range of grave goods appropriate for the underworld setting. Data are presented that suggest the interred may have been a religious specialist or shaman in life.

Keywords

Caves; Maya; religion; mortuary practices; shamanism; identity.

Introduction

This paper reports on the excavation of a small cave that contained a burial that may be the remains of a religious specialist. This remarkable interment was found in a sealed chamber in remote area of southern Belize over 15km from any known modern or prehistoric communities. Combining contextual analysis of the burial chamber and mortuary furniture and drawing analogical comparisons with contemporary and ethno-historical data on Maya religious practitioners, we suggest that this burial may have been that of a shamanic figure buried in a distant cave with the trappings of his profession. This paper contributes to discussions of potential life roles of individuals interred in various archaeological contexts ([Brown 1971](#); [Gamble et al. 2001](#); [Saxe 1970](#)).

Largely ignored by archaeologists for decades, caves in the Maya area are excellent contexts to study pre-Columbian religion and its articulations with social structure and

political organization. Across Mesoamerica caves are integral to an indigenous ethno-ecological worldview in which the physical universe is not considered distinct from divinity. Caves are inherently linked to Mesoamerican conceptions of earth, which is consistently described as a living thing (Monaghan 2000). Today archaeologists generally agree that caves were both physical spaces used for religion rituals and that the symbolic concept of *ch'een*, or cave, was deeply embedded in the Maya worldview and the social construction of space (Prufer and Brady 2005). The presence of such an orientation towards the earth across dozens of languages and cultural boundaries points to a deep and shared antiquity for the perspective. Elite use of cave imagery dates to at least 1000 BC. Examples include images of an elite in a cave on the El Rey monument from Chalcatzingo, long considered an early indicator of institutionalized elite authority (Grove and Gillespie 1984) and Olmec thrones in which elites are mediating between the surface and the underworld (Gillespie 1999).

Historically and in prehistory Maya shamans have been well-integrated actors in a wide range of social formations, including (minimally) local community functions as possessors of key cultural, religious and medical knowledge of value to residents and (maximally) as occupying larger roles influencing and advising inter-polity and potentially interregional political interactions. There has been some debate as to whether 'shaman' is a term applicable to complex societies in Mesoamerica and if so, what were their social roles. We concur with Klein et al. (2002) that the term is applicable and that shamans are religious figures who also operate in political and other community roles. There are compelling data suggesting that shamanic figures were important social actors throughout the Preclassic and Classic periods (400 BC–AD 900) and that elites exhibited shamanistic qualities (Demarest 1992; Freidel 1992).

Throughout the history of the Maya (and preceding historical recording) shamanism has been among the most durable, and flexible, social institutions (Prufer 2005). Shamans are linked to caves, which, along with mountains, are considered the most fundamentally charged sacred spaces in the Maya worldview (Brady and Prufer 2005; Prufer and Brady 2005). This paper first describes the cave setting, the burial arrangement and funerary goods. Discussion includes the material and iconographic analyses of the artifacts from the cave site and a contextual analysis of the mortuary arrangement. Finally, we propose that the interred may have been a shaman and further suggest that his status in life may explain the non-standard location of his burial.

Investigations at Bats'ub Cave

Bats'ub Cave is located along south-west flank of the Maya Mountains, a volcanic spine skirted by a limestone apron that forms the largest relief feature on the Yucatan Peninsula (Fig. 1). Annual rainfall can reach nearly 5m, and the seasonal deluges have carved out a rugged limestone terrain replete with large canyons, karst towers, sinkholes and caves. The cave is 15km north-north-west of the modern Mopan Maya village San José and accessible by a seven-to-nine-hour hike across challenging terrain. The nearest archaeological sites of any significance are Uxbenká, 20km to the south east, and Pusilhá, 30km to the south, though a scattering of house mounds 6km from the cave was noted by Hammond (1975). The Bats'ub Cave is not a particularly impressive cave. It is located at the base of a low hill about 150m east of a small, unnamed perennial stream that does not appear on any

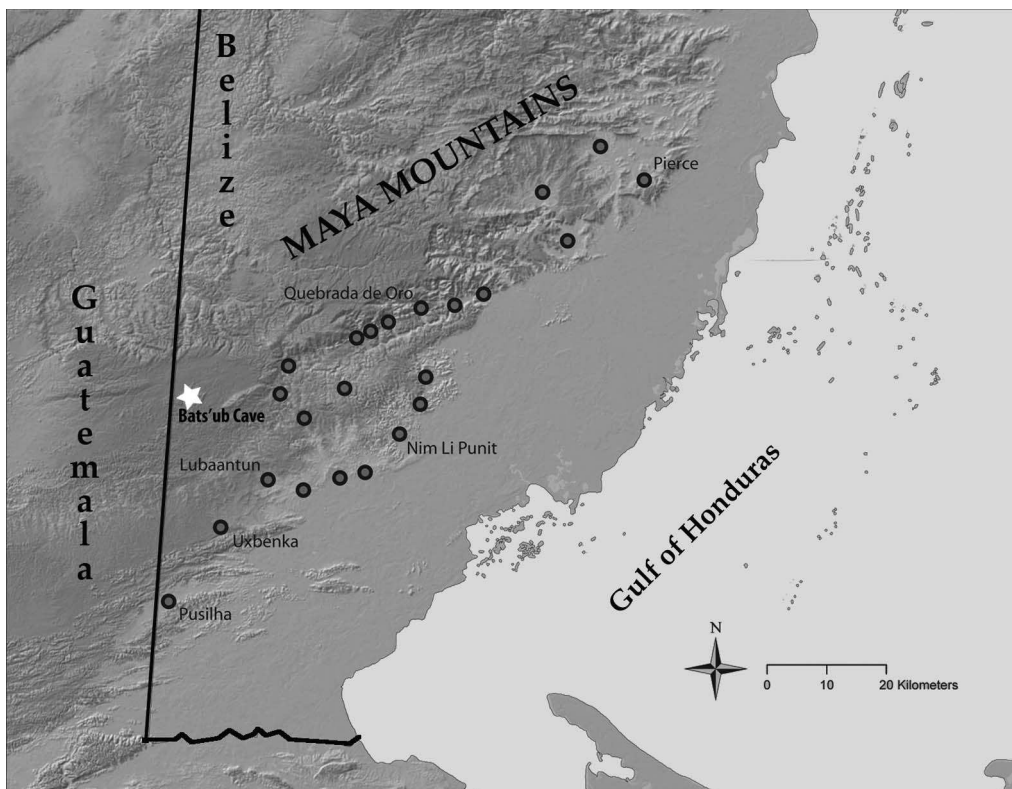


Figure 1 Map of known archaeological sites in southern Belize in relationship to Bats'ub Cave. Uxbenká is the nearest Early Classic settlement to Bats'ub Cave.

topographic map. Bats'ub Cave was initially documented as a salvage operation in 1995 after it was discovered by members of a British volunteer organization assisting the government of Belize with a forestry project. The entrance to the cave is 1.2 meters wide, 1.5 meters high and faces north (Fig. 2). Entry requires a 1.5m vertical descent into a front room 11 meters long and slightly over three meters at its widest point. Cultural materials were found inside a second, interior, room that measures 4.3 meters by 2.5 meters. The two rooms were separated by a floor-to-ceiling masonry wall. The front room is periodically wet. The only artifact found in the front room was the 'toe' of a 'shoe-pot' vessel partly buried in clay and apparently washed into the place it was found.

A controlled surface collection of the once sealed second chamber yielded five ceramic vessels, a small wooden stool carved from a single block of wood and a scatter of human remains, several spondylus shell beads, a hematite ear-spool and a single fragmentary maize cob (*zea mays*). Throughout the entire chamber charcoal and burnt wood fragments were collected. Evidence of burning in the chamber was also extensive: the ceiling and portions of the walls were coated with heavy layers of carbon, consistent with both burning of torches for light and the burning of incense.

Limited testing in 1995 determined that there were intact sub-surface human remains and led to the recovery of a small inverted bowl containing organic material later identified as

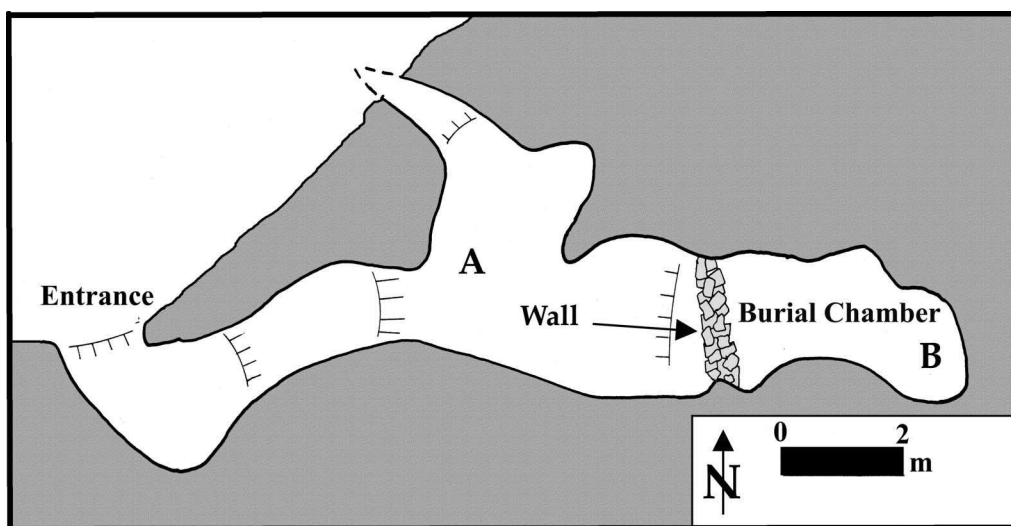


Figure 2 Plan view of the Bats'ub/25 Flight Cave. The front room (A) was used for preparing plaster and had few artifacts while the rear burial room (B) was the focus of the interment of the sub-surface burial. A floor-to-ceiling wall separated the two chambers.

cacao (chocolate) seeds. Lacking resources to initiate an extensive excavation, it was decided to return at a later date and conduct a more thorough investigation. In 1996 a team returned to the cave by helicopter for ten days to conduct excavations and to survey the surrounding area for signs of surface settlement. The excavations revealed an articulated sub-surface skeleton as well as a number of associated grave goods (Fig. 3). Removal of the thin surface soil revealed a degraded plaster floor beneath which a single person was interred. This adult burial, identified as a male, was found in a shallow trench dug along the north wall of the inner chamber at a depth of approximately 20cm with the body placed on an unprepared clay floor. The skeleton was oriented with the head to the east, and fully extended on a natural clay floor, which slopes slightly downward. The sloping of the floor resulted in differential preservation of the skeletal material; below the pelvis the skeleton was fairly well preserved but the upper portion of the body, including the pelvis, upper extremities and vertebral column, was resting on clay that was somewhat moist, fostering decay.

The cranium had been removed from the body and in its place was a partial ceramic jar. A skull (presumably from this individual) was found to the left of the medial plane of the body above the pelvis. When excavated, this skull was visible but it had collapsed and, except for the largely complete mandible and numerous teeth, disintegrated during excavation. The spinal column, which was resting on and slightly embedded in the moist clay floor, was complete but unrecoverable. Most of it had been replaced by clay leaving only a thin veneer of skeletal material. Scatters of teeth were found both in the area where the mandible was found, and also at the top of the spinal column around the cervical vertebrae. In the area of the neck seventeen beads, thirteen of which are jadeite and four of which are hematite, were recovered along with two carved shell disks. The disks are undecorated save a scalloped border design. The arrangement of the beads and shell disks suggest that this was a necklace placed around the neck of the interred. Above the beads, in the space where the head should have been, the

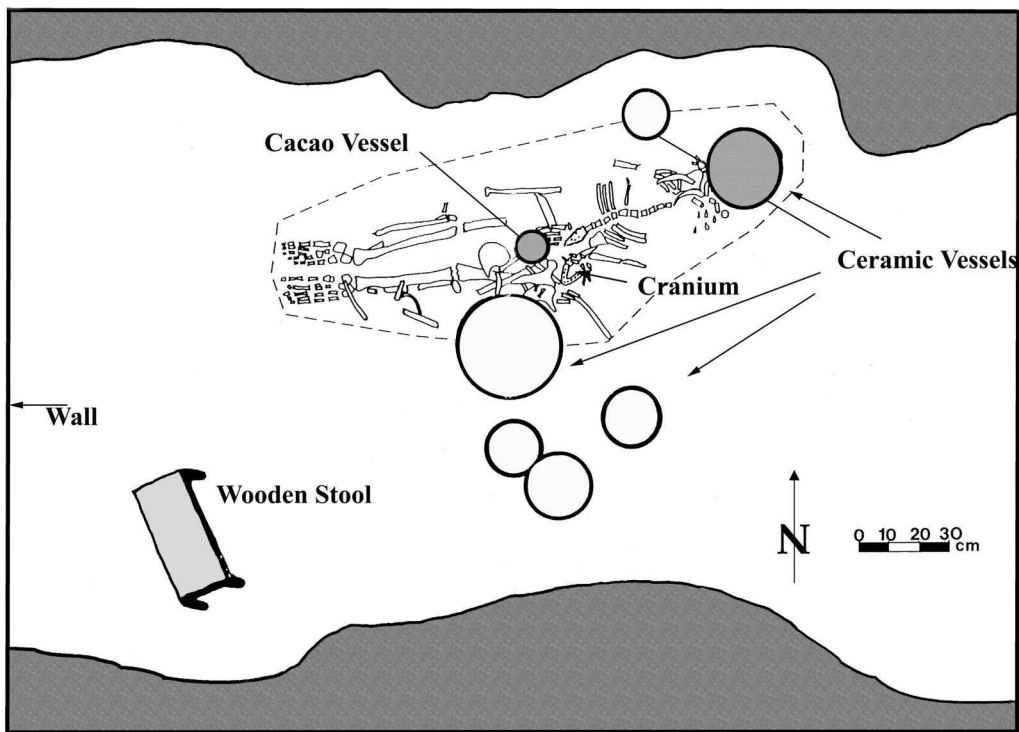


Figure 3 Map showing the principal Bats'ub burial. The dotted line demarcates the burial trench. Shaded circles represent sub-surface vessels while open circles are vessels found on the surface of the cave.

lower hemisphere of a large jar or bowl had been placed which contained carbonized wood fragments and a single jadeite bead, along with a mass of unidentified organic material.

Loose soil and clay surrounded the burial and the olla. Above this was a thin layer of crushed limestone, possibly the remains of a degraded plaster floor four to six centimeters thick. Embedded in this layer, just above the pelvis, was the small bowl containing five cacao seeds. In the front room of the cave, at the base of the wall separating the two chambers, a location was identified atop a flat rock where travertine was crushed, presumably for construction of the floor and mortar to seal the chamber. The wall itself was constructed of rough-cut and uncut limestone blocks neatly stacked and sealed with a mixture of crushed travertine, mud, ash and, in at least one place, bone. Considerable care had been taken to ensure that all cracks between the blocks were thoroughly sealed, greatly aiding the long-term preservation of organic materials in the chamber.

Analysis of the grave furniture

Ceramics

All of the vessels were found in the rear chamber. Two were recovered during the excavations and five vessels were surface finds; two were inverted and five upright. The

cacao seeds were in a crude unslipped bowl buried above the pelvis. The second buried vessel was the lower hemisphere of an unslipped and undecorated jar or bowl, found upright, above the neck of the individual, as if meant to replace the head. Sherd material found throughout the chamber closely matches this vessel though refitting was not possible. Since no rim sherds were found it is likely that the vessel was broken prior to the burial event.

Of the surface ceramics, the most distinctive is a black and red on orange basal flange polychrome bowl with a ring-stand base (Fig. 4) diagnostic of the Early Classic Tzakol (2 or 3) phase Dos Arroyos ceramic group, based on form, paste, slip and decoration (Gifford 1976: 173–4; Smith 1955: 128–30; Smith and Gifford 1966: 157). The vessel is slipped on the interior and on the exterior to just below the lip of the flange. The unslipped base has concentric striations. The highly glossy surface is decorated with black horizontal lines below the rim, and painting on the vessel is rendered in black and red, as well as some ‘wash’ shades of gray.

The vessel iconography is unusual. The interior is decorated with a bird-like image in profile that has conflated avian, reptilian and aquatic features. The head is birdlike, bearing a strong resemblance to a hummingbird with an elongated beak. The undulating body is snake-like, and in the absence of feathers it could easily be interpreted as such. A single talon gives the image a raptorial characteristic. While all these creatures were commonly rendered on Tzakol ceramics, this conflated example is unique. Other composites are found in scenes representing the underwater world, a murky realm symbolic of transition between the sky, the earth and the underworld, where such creatures are often interpreted as being in a metamorphic state (Hellmuth 1987). Other features are also unique to this vessel. The distal end of the creature appears to be emerging from a conical object that closely resembles a ceramic torch holder (see Pendergast (1990: 139) for examples from Altun Ha; Graham et al. (1980: 169) for examples from central Belize caves; Brady (1989: 257–8) for examples from Naj Tunich Cave). This object may also represent a blood-letter, which would be in accordance with depictions of sacrificial imagery (Schele and Miller 1986: 52, fig. 40, 176, fig. IV.1). The feathery border of the drawing is sharply serrated, giving it also the appearance of a flame. Emerging from either the top of the conical object or the base of the creature are two curvilinear designs that may be representative of smoke, stylized wings or some type of an aquatic dorsal fin.

The exterior iconography portrays a scene appropriate for both the underworld and a funerary context. The exterior wall was horizontally abraded in prehistory which removed some of the pigments and slip. This may be use related, the result of a cord or band that was wrapped around the exterior. The most prominent images depict two recumbent individuals in profile, facing upward. These are repeated on opposite sides of the vessel, though they vary slightly in length. These panels were painted in a convention that maximized the amount of imagery that can be portrayed in a small space. The figures appear distorted; certain features are exaggerated while others are minimized. Each individual’s head appears to be situated lower on the torso than would be anatomically correct, possibly giving the appearance of being disarticulated, though it may be merely the result of compressing the painting onto the small panel.

The individuals’ have U-shaped mouths with protruding lower lips, semicircular scrolls surrounding the mouth and a red dot on the cheek. The one visible nose is distinctly curled forward and downwards, and the eyes of both figures are thin slits with a single black dot,

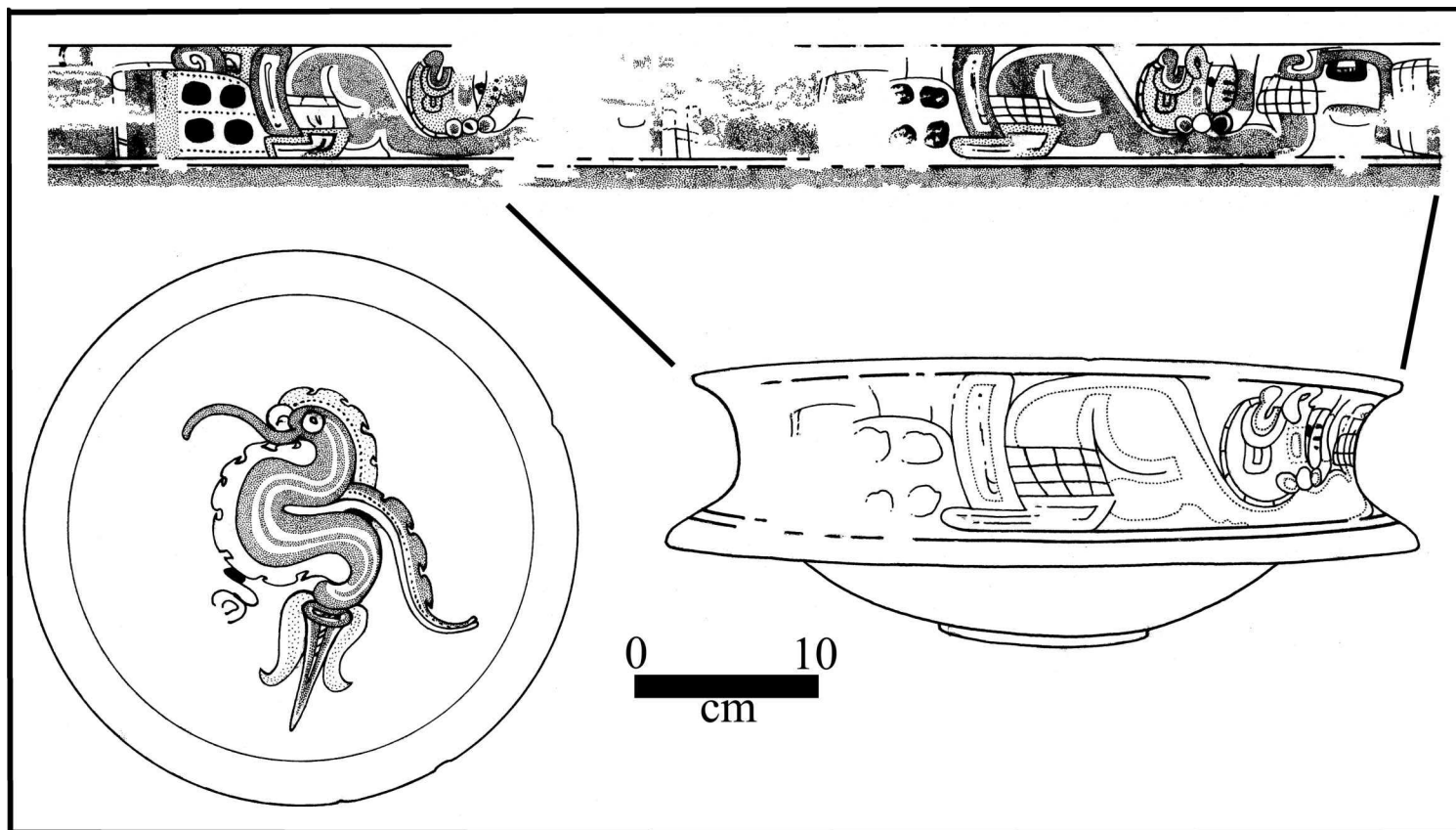


Figure 4 Roll-out drawing of the Bats'ub/25 Flight polychrome. The interior figure is a metamorphic creature that conflates known Early Classic motifs with some not seen before. The exterior panel shows two recumbent supernaturals. Several features indicate that this is a death scene.

consistent with images of death. Three circular ornaments surround the ears, and what may be a knotted headdress projects from the forehead. Each supine body is shown with knees bent and wearing anklets. A hatched design decorating the anklets is repeated on the outstretched wrists, reaching above the torso into what may be a serpent's mouth. The individuals' exaggerated feet are resting against what is likely a sacred bundle, or *ikatz*.

In general, reclining individuals are rarely depicted on ceramics. Most common are figures found on Late Classic *copador* ceramics from Copan, though they generally face down or outward and are in active poses (Willey et al. 1994: figs 92, 96, 97), rather than in an upward repose of death. Images of other personages are found on an Early Classic vessels, such as one from Nohmul that depicts a exterior rendition of a deity in profile facing upward with bird imagery on the interior (Anderson and Cook 1944: 92 fig. 4b) and an unprovenienced Dos Arroyos ceramic group vessel lid from Petén shows a painted deity head in profile, complete with a large three-piece earflare, similar mouth shape, vertical lines on the forehead and a slitted eye identical to the Bats'ub example (Reents-Budet 1994: 329; Schele and Miller 1986: 281). The latter has been identified variously as God Q (Schele and Miller 1986: 281), the Young Maize God or an ancestor (Reents-Budet 1994: 329). The only example of a figure in the same repose is also nearly identical to the Bats'ub vessel and comes from similar vessel found in a cave in the northern Maya Mountains (Ishihara 2000).

There are physical characteristics of several known deities on the vessel. The protruding lip and bulbous nose could indicate that the individual was aged, a feature of God D who is associated with the earth, creation, fire and maize. There are some very distinct similarities to God M, the merchant god who has the same mouth as the Bats'ub deity, is frequently shown with his knees bent and wears ornamentation on both the wrists and ankles, but is not seen before the Postclassic and his Classic period counterpart, God L, is frequently depicted in relation to sacred bundles, but otherwise bears little resemblance to the Bats'ub deity (Taube 1992: figs 44, 53). It is also possible that the deity depicted on the Bats'ub pot may be First Father, or *Hun Hunahpu*, the mythical father of the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh creation myth. First Father is frequently seen in Classic period iconography depicting him as dead or negotiating the passage through the watery underworld (Reents-Budet 1994; pers. comm. 1997). Regardless of the identity of the individual, the vessel is an appropriate item for a burial associated with caves, mortuary activity and death.

The other ceramic vessels are unpainted. One has a white interior slip, was found inverted next to the burial while the others were found clustered together. One interesting vessel is a striated jar decorated with an appliqué encircling the shoulder consisting of horizontally elongated and incised fillets, or lugs, applied at regular intervals. Such appliques are well represented in the Maya area, from Middle Preclassic *algo-es-algo* ceramics from Bilbao, Guatemala (Parsons 1967: 182), to Tzakol 2 and 3 vessels from Uaxactun (Smith 1955: 51).

The remaining two surface collected vessels are 'shoe-pots'. Both are striated and have modeled faces applied to the front or 'toe' of the vessel. One has a human-like face but is shaped to depict a turtle carapace lamina (Fig. 5a). The second is similar in paste and decoration, but does not depict any recognizable animal and has a single loop handle opposite the appliqué face (Fig. 5b). Shoe-pots are primarily found in the Lowlands in

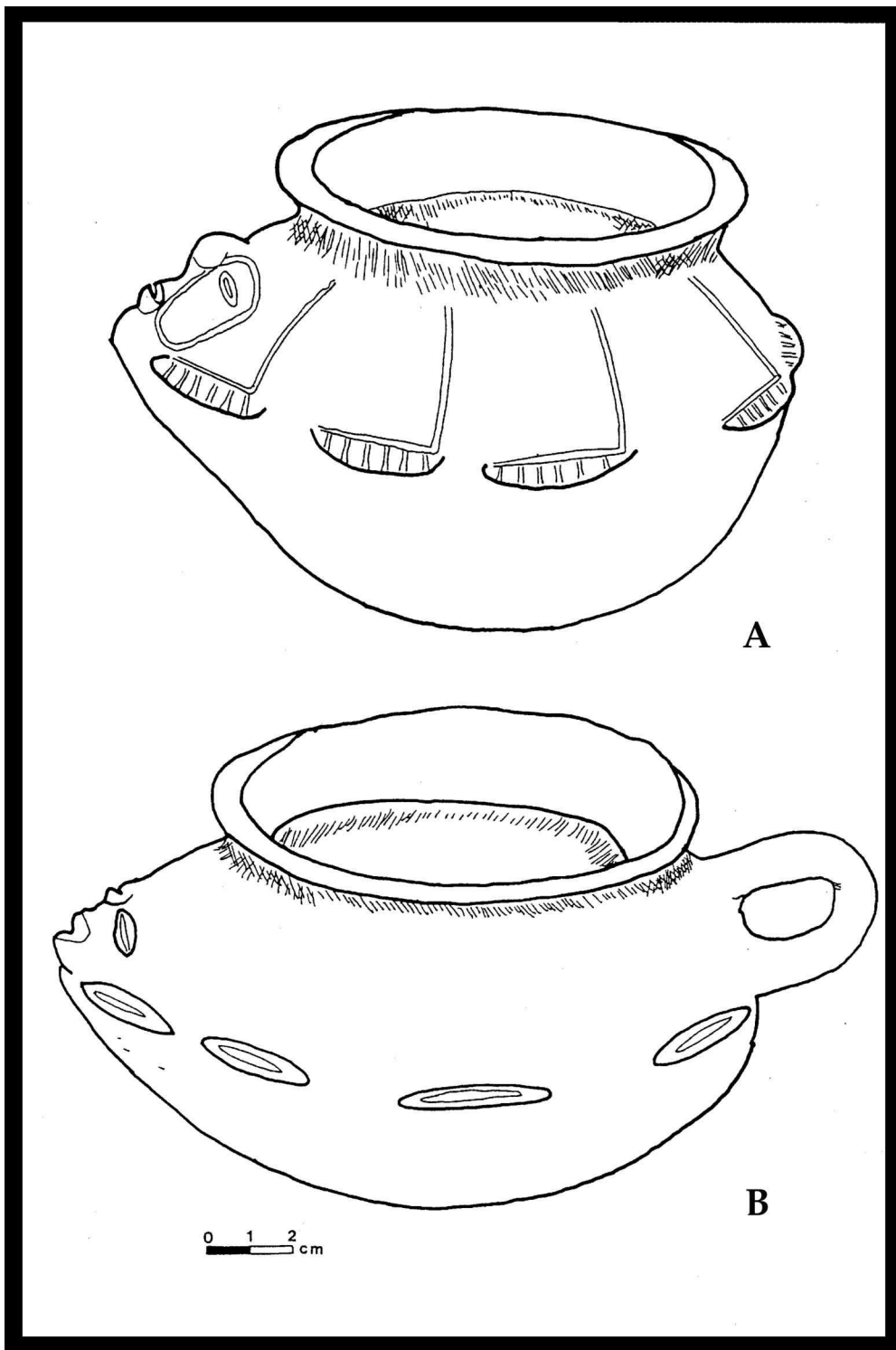


Figure 5 Two shoe-pots with modeled faces recovered from the Bats'ub/25 Flight cave. Similar vessels have been found in caves in Belize and Petén. They occur predominantly in Early Classic contexts.

caves and are diagnostic of the Early Classic. At least thirty-two Early Classic shoe-pots were recovered at Naj Tunich, located less than 16km distant from Bats'ub cave (Brady 1989, 1992), and others have been documented from Caves Branch Cave, Actun Tzimin (Graham et al. 1980: 161–2), Petroglyph Cave (Reents-Budet and MacLeod 1986), Footprint Cave, and Chanona Cave (Graham et al. 1980: 161–3).

Jade and other small ornaments

Seventeen beads, fourteen of which are jadeite and four of which are a black mineral, were recovered from around the neck of the interred individual. The arrangement of these beads suggests that this was a necklace worn by the deceased. Accompanying these beads were two unperforated shell disks, each decorated with a scalloped border design. A single large jadeite bead was recovered from the partial olla found at the top of the cervical vertebrae. Jadeite beads are fairly common grave goods. In southern Belize, four jade beads and three ear ornaments were reportedly recovered from a burial at Lubaantun (Joyce et al. 1927: 305). The significance of the jadeite bead in found in the partial olla will be discussed in detail below.

On the burial chamber surface four slightly curved spondylus shell (*Spondylus sp.*) beads were recovered, one of which was broken. Spondylus artifacts have been recovered from a number of Early Classic contexts, including burials at Tikal and Uaxactún and an unidentified context at Pusilhá (Andrews 1969: 25). A single ear-spool manufactured from a soft black mineral, likely hematite, was found near the polychrome vessel.

Organic materials

One of the most remarkable aspects of Bats'ub Cave is the excellent preservation of organic materials, the discovery of which can shed considerable light on how caves were utilized. Including wood fragments, over 200 organic artifacts were recovered from the cave.

Pitch-pine torches. The bulk of the organic material recovered from the cave consists of wood fragments, primarily pine (*Pinus* sp), that were used as both torch fragments and fuel for burning copal incense, found both burned and unburned. The samples examined belong to the section *Diploxylon*, the hard pine group, either *Pinus caribaea* (Caribbean pine) or *Pinus patula* (Mexican weeping pine: Lee Newsom pers. comm. 1997; also see Phillips 1941). Since the distribution of *P. patula* does not include Petén or Belize, it seems likely that the Bats'ub/25 Flight samples are of the species *P. caribaea*, which is commonly found on the coastal plain of southern Belize (Record and Hess 1946: 20–1).

The pine fragments appear to have been 'splits', or thin long sections of branch or heartwood. Most of them were charred at one end. Similar pine fragments were recovered from Actun Polbilche, in central Belize, where they were found in association with other wood artifacts in a Late Classic deposit (Pendergast 1974: 59). Burnt wood fragments that may be related to torch or incense burning have also been noted from Postclassic deposits at Uchentzuc cave in central Belize (Schmidt 1978:110, fig. 7a), and from Gordon's Cave in Honduras (Rue et al. 1989). Gann reported finding in a cave in central Belize 'two

bundles of pitch-pine sticks, each stick a couple feet long and of the thickness of a lead pencil, bound together with henequen fibre, and evidently meant to be used as torches' (1925: 110–11).

Three wood and one carbonized pine samples were submitted for conventional radiocarbon dating and all provided dates in the Early Classic (Fig. 6). Due to its resin content pine is an ideal material for a torch fuel. The presence of long thin pine splits, or their burnt stubs, in cave contexts reflects the practical use of an excellent fuel for providing illumination or burning incense. Pine does not grow in the region surrounding the cave (Parker et al. 1993), and must have been imported from elsewhere. Today the nearest sources of pine are 30km distant in southern Petén (Laporte 1994: 4) or in the coastal savannas of southern Belize, 40km from the cave (Iremonger and Sayre 1994). Given the number of caves in the lowlands that were utilized for ritual purposes and the presence of pine torches in an increasing number of cave reports it may well be that pine had an important place in the ritual economy in southern Belize and elsewhere.

Aside from practical applications pine has serious ritual connotations in Mesoamerica (Morehart et al. 2005). Among the Mixe of Oaxaca, burning pine-pitch plays an important role in activities related to curing, rites of passage, agricultural production and mortuary practices (Lipp 1985). Fray Diego de Landa observed that bundles of sticks were burnt in association with ritual activities (Tozzer 1941: 163). McGee (1990: 53) describes Lacandon production of 'virgin fire' using sticks of kindling. Among the eighteenth-century residents of San Andrés Larráinzar, Chiapas, pine branches were given as offerings in caves along with candles, incense and flowers (Sanmiguel 1994: 166). Vogt refers to pine as a ritual plant used in association with ancestor worship among the modern Tzotzil and as 'a symbol of Nature par excellence [which]... is located toward TE'TIK, the wild woods' (1981: 122), as opposed to more domestic types of plants. Poor preservation of organic materials at surface sites has likely masked evidence of an important relationship between the Maya ritual and pine in a variety of contexts, though remains of these materials are preserved in caves.

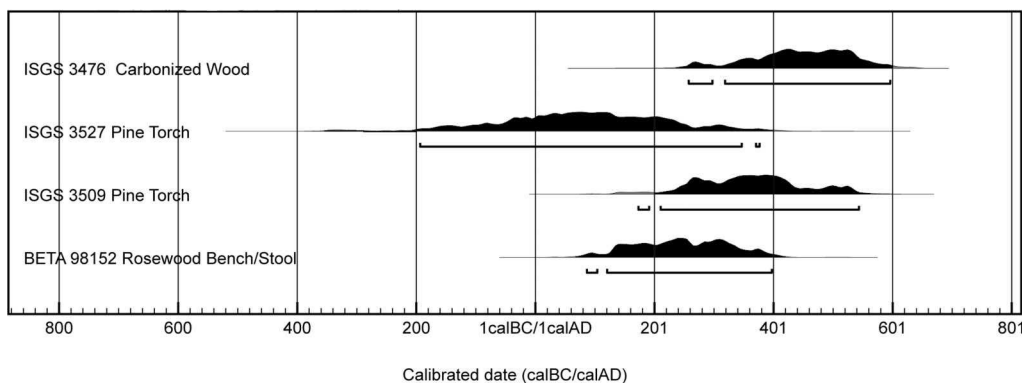


Figure 6 Plot of calibrated age-ranges (2σ) from Bats'ub Cave showing the likelihood that the events in the cave were contemporaneous. All dates calibrated using OxCal v4.0.5 Bronk Ramsey (2001) and the r:5 IntCal04 atmospheric curve (Reimer et al. 2004).

Wooden stool. The intact wooden stool, or bench (Plate 1), measures 35 x 17 x 8cm, has three legs that taper outward at the bottom (a fourth was missing) and was carved from a single piece of wood. The seat appears once to have had a surface treatment; there are traces of red pigment and plaster. The wood comes from the family *Fabaceae*, likely from the genus *Dalbergia* sp., commonly known as rosewood (Lee Newsom pers. comm. 1996). Two species are found in the region: Honduras rosewood (*D. stevensonii*), best known from southern Belize in the area between the Sarstoon River and the Monkey River, including the Bats'ub study area. *D. stevensonii* heartwood is characterized as pinkish-brown or purplish. It is so durable that when used for house posts it lasts over forty years in the moist tropics. The second local species is Granadillo (*D. cubilquitzensis*), which is found in eastern Guatemala. It is also a durable material, and its heartwood color ranges from orange to purple, though it turns brown or purple when dry (Record and Hess 1946: 257–8). The Bats'ub stool is brownish and heavily weathered but thin sections of the stool body revealed a wood that is purplish brown and very attractive. An AMS radiocarbon date of the stool dates the source-tree layer to AD 110–410 at 2σ (Fig. 6).

Recovery of carved wood artifacts from cave contexts is rare, although not without precedent. The distribution of small portable wood objects used in cave rituals has been discussed recently (Prufer et al. 2003), including a wooden deity figure recovered in the Maya Mountains. Graham et al. (1980) reported a number of spectacular wooden artifacts from Chanona cave. Pendergast (1974: 48–9) discovered the remnants of a wooden box and a spear at the cave Actun Polbilche. A wooden statue of a seated individual was looted from a cave near the Monkey River and later repatriated (Stuart and Housley 1999). In 1995 a two meter-long wood bench of probable Late Classic date was found in a previously looted cave near the Monkey River (Prufer 2002). More recently Prufer identified a wooden basin or canoe in another cave in southern Belize, dating to c. AD 200.

By far the largest collection of wood artifacts recovered from subterranean contexts in the Maya lowlands comes from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá. There, over 300

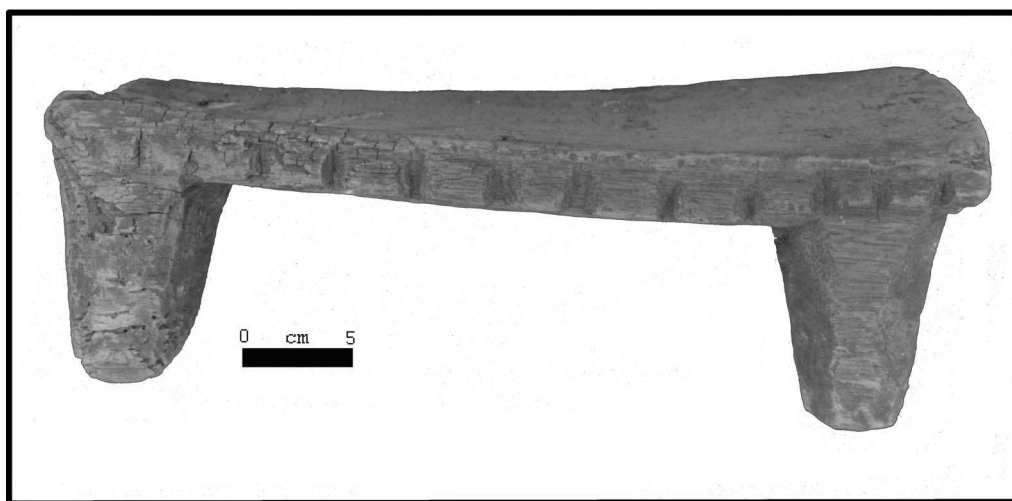


Plate 1 The small rosewood stool recovered from Bats'ub Cave.

worked wood objects were documented, mostly from early twentieth-century dredging conducted by Edward Thompson (Coggins and Ladd 1992). Among these objects is a 'miniature' wood bench with a concave surface carved from a single block of wood that is remarkably similar to the Bats'ub stool. That object was dated to *c.* AD 750–1145 (Coggins and Ladd 1992: 302–3). Two other small wood benches were recovered from the cenote by Mexican archaeologists, one of which has a carved zoomorphic serpent head (Piña Chan 1968: 3). Many similar examples are known from the Pacific coast of Costa Rica (Hartman 1907) and the Caribbean, where Taino *duho* stools were considered sources of power and prestige (Ostapkowicz 1997).

Some bench-like objects may have functioned as thrones or seats associated with divine kingship, ancestor worship or shamanic enterprises. The idea that altars were seats of power linking individuals with divine ancestors and underworld deities was originally proposed for the massive stone-block altars of La Venta (Grove 1973). More recently, Gillespie (1999) discussed the functional role of throne and/or bench-like objects as altars upon which powerful individuals would seat themselves in order to mediate ritual relationships with ancestors and supernatural realms. A variety of objects have been described, sometimes interchangeably, as thrones, altars, benches and seats (Grove 1973; Kaplan 1995; Schele and Miller 1986: 112). They are depicted on ceramics displaying courtly and underworld scenes involving individuals or supernaturals sitting on bench-like objects (see Kerr 1989). Four-legged objects have been found at found at Kaminaljuyu (Kaplan 1995), Bilbao (Parsons 1969), and Laguna de los Cerros (Susan Gillespie pers. comm. 1997). Monuments from Kaminaljuyú depict elites seated on small four-legged stools, some decorated with carved skulls (Kaplan 1995: 193–4, fig. 17). Many 'seats' illustrated on ceramic and other media may have been constructed of wood, a more malleable material.

There are a number of accounts of shamans using stools in ritual activities. Landa (Tozzer 1941: 94) reported that wooden idols were placed on 'small stools entwined with leaves' below which clay idols were placed. The juxtaposing of wood idols above and clay ones below the stool may be symbolic of the earth and the underworld. A seventeenth-century account by Thomas Gage describes a cave where a wooden 'idol' was found 'standing upon a low stool covered with linen cloth' around which were scattered 'single reals, some plantains and other fruits, half-burned wax candles, pots of maize, one little one of honey, and little dishes wherein frankincense had been burned' (Thompson 1958: 281). Landa also records a ceremony where four men representing *Chaacs* are seated on stools placed in the four corners of a courtyard, connected by a cord which each of the men holds. In the center of the courtyard a priest sat on a small stool officiating at a ceremony to anoint and cleanse children (Tozzer 1941: 104). Actual tables were introduced by the Spanish, though in some contexts they have taken on the function of altars (Gillespie 1999).

Among the K'ichee tables function as household altars; celestial deities are given space on top of the table, while stones placed under the table represent the terrestrial deities (Tedlock 1985: 164). The Yucatec Maya utilize a specially constructed table altar for a number of ceremonies, including the requests to *Chaac* for rain. During the recitation of a prayer for rain four chanters are seated on a bench in front of the altar (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934: 140). 'Table' altars are also mentioned in early historical accounts involving

caves, though their exact form is not clear. Eighteenth-century church documents from Chamula describe a then actively used mortuary cave where:

A type of stone table, over which there was a badly made cross, and at its sides several candle stumps, and the heads of many turkeys which had been consumed there, and some small containers in which they make offerings of incense and liquid . . . around said cross there was an arc made from green leaves, which would take at least eight days to make, and where this arc was attached to the floor there were some hollows, in which I found bones which appear to be from the deceased.

(Sobre ydólatras 1778, cited in Sanmiguel 1994: 165)

Thompson, quoting Villagutierre (1983 [1701]), discussed the burial practices of the Dolores or Central Chols of the western lowlands, ethnic cousins of the Manche Chol:

These Indians had the custom of burying the dead in open country a short distance from the town and of putting over the graves of men little stools, *puquietas* and other things used by men, and on those of women metates, cooking pots, gourds, bowls, and other utensils of that kind.

(Thompson 1938: 596–7)

The Bats'ub stool would seem to fit this description. It is little, was included as an item of burial furniture and may well have been the property of the deceased. Colonial accounts from among the Pokomám of Veracruz indicate the dead were buried with their finest possessions following funerary treatments that include placing the deceased on a dais (Coe 1975: 88). The Huichol of Western Mexico bury the dead with their personal belongings and other votive offerings (Furst 1975: 44).

The stool also fits within an underworld setting. A figurine from a Late Postclassic burial at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, depicts a supernatural seated on a small four-legged bench smoking a cigar (Chase and Chase 1986: 16). The placement of such an object in a mortuary context likely depicts a scene from the underworld, where, as described in the creation myth Popol Vuh, benches are the property of the lords of the underworld (Tedlock 1985: 136). Two Late Classic figurines from the Jaina Island in Campeche also depict supernaturals seated on four-legged thrones with a slightly conclave surfaces (Coe 1973). Elsewhere in Central America deities are associated with seats. Huichol gods sit in 'chairs' as reflected in the use of *uwéni*, or special seats, by shamans, which are modeled after mythic examples. A terra cotta figurine thought to have come from a cave in western Mexico depicts two individuals sitting on four-legged platform covered by a canopy interpreted as representing a cave opening (Furst 1975: 58, fig. 11).

Cacao seeds. The discovery of intact cacao seeds is a rare occasion in archaeology. Mesoamerican cacao used in the production of chocolate belongs to the neotropical genus *Theobroma*, species *cacao* L. (Gómez-Pompa et al. 1990: 249). As discussed above, the seeds recovered at Bats'ub cave were found in a small inverted bowl placed above the burial in the area of the pelvis. The association of cacao with mortuary activities has been well documented in the lowlands, primarily in the form of iconography rendered on

funerary vessels (Coe and Coe 1995: 45). Cacao would have made a fine offering to accompany an individual to the underworld, and its placement in an inverted bowl with the deceased may be an expression of its intended use by that particular person.

The Bats'ub cacao finds are discussed in detail elsewhere ([Prufer and Hurst 2007](#)) and are summarized here. The deposit consists of five intact seeds that were surrounded by a matrix of crushed limestone and an unidentified organic material. Spectrographic analysis indicated that both seeds were, indeed, cacao. The use of cacao as both a currency and a beverage is well documented in pre-Columbian and historic sources. Hieroglyphic evidence for the consumption of cacao liquids during the Classic period comes from polychrome ceramics (Stuart 1989; MacLeod and Kerr 1994: 6–9), where the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) describes the consumption of cacao by elites. Several different preparations of cacao were consumed by elites, including sweetened varieties and in beverages mixed with chili peppers (Coe and Coe 1995). Landa also describes cacao as being mixed with flowers and 'virgin water' and used to anoint children (Tozzer 1941: 105).

Archaeological remains of actual cacao are scant, owing to poor preservation. The best-known examples of prehistoric cacao come from residue analysis of four Early Classic vessels found in Río Azul Tomb 19, one of which also has a hieroglyphic text describing its contents as being cacao ([Hall et al. 1990](#); [Stuart 1988](#)). Whole cacao beans have been reportedly recovered from Early Classic Burial A-40, at Uaxactún, Guatemala (Kidder 1947: 71), and more recently from outside the Maya heartland, at Cerén, El Salvador ([Lentz et al. 1996](#)). A single carbonized wood fragment of *T. cacao* was recovered from an earth mound at Kokeal, in the Pulltrouser Swamp area of Belize (Miksicek 1983: 103).

Thompson mentions a documentary source on the Chol Maya that points to a possible connection between the Bats'ub deposit, especially the stool and the cacao, and weddings. He cites a letter from 1595 that discusses the Central Chol of the western lowlands, near the Maya Mountains:

The form of the marriage is: the bride gives the bridegroom a small stool painted in colors, and also give[s] him five grains of cacao, and says to him 'These I give thee as a sign that I accept thee as my husband.' And he also gives her some new skirts and another five grains of cacao, saying the same thing.

([Thompson 1938: 602](#))

While it may seem curious to invoke a wedding ceremony in our treatment of a funeral assemblage, the fact that the two most distinctive burial goods in the Raleigh cache are both mentioned in the context of marriage raises interesting points. The ancient stool does appear to have been painted, and the number of actual cacao beans found in the Bats'ub deposit (five) equals that in the description. It is tempting to speculate that the inclusion of these materials in the chamber may reflect on the relationship between the individuals or possibly recapitulate an earlier event in the life of one of them.

In the recent past, the K'ichee' Maya of Chichicastenango, Guatemala, considered the cacao seed to be sacred and the tree taboo. The 'wood should never be used for firewood and . . . its seed should be on the table in all ceremonies' (Bunzel 1952: 44). The Mazatec of west Mexico bury cacao seeds as an offering under the fire hearth inside the home (Weitlaner and Hoppe 1969: 518), though this is not the case elsewhere. The Zapotec, from Tehuantepec, Mexico,

place cacao beans on altars for Day of the Dead ceremonies (Parsons 1936: 281). Among the mid-twentieth century Chorti Maya of south-east Guatemala cacao was considered a sacred and ceremonial drink, but it was never left as an 'offering', unlike maize, *chilate* and *atol*, which are consumed ceremonially and offered as a 'sacrificial food' (Wisdom 1940: 387).

There is some direct evidence that cacao forms an important part of cave rituals. The Q'eqchi' place cacao, corn dough, gruel and turkey parts on the altar inside the cave for consumption by the *tzuultaq'a*, the most important of the Earth Lords (Wilson 1995: 72). They also leave offerings of raw cacao seeds (*rax cacao*) at the entrance to the cave. The *rax cacao* is part of a larger offering referred to as *majejac* prepared in the home by both men and women, though the cave ritual is restricted to men only (Adams and Brady 2005). Outside the Maya area, Weitlaner (1969: 445) has noted that the Cuicatec of Oaxaca use cacao as an offering in cave ritual.

While it has been proposed that cacao was not extensively grown in the Petén (Coe and Coe 1995: 52), it is possible that the cacao found in the cave may have originated in the Maya Mountains or the foothills near Uxbenká. The contemporary Q'eqchi' and Mopán Maya engage in extensive cacao farming, and southern Belize was known at the time of contact for the quality and quantity of its cacao production (Hammond 1975). Recently groves of cacao have been found near Late Classic ruins in the Maya Mountains, and it has been determined that these represent remnant populations of domesticates.

Zea Mays cob. Two fragments of carbonized *Zea Mays* cob were recovered from the cave. They measure 1.46cm and 3.53cm long, and both are 1cm thick. Maize cobs have also been recovered from ritual cave contexts at Naj Tunich (Brady 1989: 86) and at Gordon's Cave near Copan, Honduras (Brady 1995: 34). It is generally accepted that food remains in burial contexts were intended to serve as sustenance for the deceased in the afterlife, possibly associated with offerings of ritual bread, or *wa*.

Maize also played an important part in Maya creation myths. In addition to being the staple of the classic Maya diet it was thought to be the substance from which humans were formed by the gods during primordial times (Schele and Miller 1986: 144). In modern-day Tzotzil cosmology the sun-creator cut the original ear of corn from his groin to provide food for his people. Maize is frequently served as gruel, and the Tzotzil word for gruel, *ul*, is the same word used in men's language in Chamula for semen (Gossen 1974: 229). Maize grains are also used by Tzotzil shamans from Zinacantan in rituals to determine how many parts of the 'inner soul' are missing from a person (Vogt 1990: 121). In a description that might be related to the charred maize cob found at Bats'ub, Landa recorded that maize in Yucatan was mixed with copal and burned in rituals related to cleansing (Tozzer 1941: 104) which may be related to the Lacondon practice of offering maize grains burned with copal along with a prayer to 'free the *balche* from evil effects' (Tozzer 1941: 140, note 658).

Bats'ub Cave as a non-standard mortuary space

Caves are considered atypical mortuary spaces for the Maya. Most general discussions suggest that architectural chambers were resting places. While sampling data indicate little is known about where most Maya were buried (Chase 1997: 19, table 2.3; Webster 1997: 9–12)

the recent growth of cave studies indicates that the vast majority had no primary mortuary function (Brady and Prufer 2005; Prufer 2002; Scott and Brady 2005). While those containing humans have been regularly reported (Brady 1989; Brady and Prufer 2005; Prufer 2002; Thompson 1959) synthetic discussions of why they were selected for burials are lacking. Why were some people buried in caves? Did life roles determine whether one might be interred in a cave? Given the supernatural role of caves in the Maya worldview (Prufer and Brady 2005) it seems likely that cave interments carried specific social meaning in terms of both the roles of the individuals and their relationship to surviving members of society.

In the past, findings of human remains in caves were variously assigned to practices of elite mortuary treatment or, more frequently, human sacrifice (MacLeod and Puleston 1978; Thompson 1975: xxxi–xxxvi). Much of the evidence cited for human sacrifice in caves comes from analogy to reported historical examples of such activities. One historical text describes a Spanish priest having his heart removed and his body thrown into a hole in the ground, presumably a cave (Jones 1977: 29). While some accounts of human sacrifice may be overstated (Tedlock 1992b), there is both historical and archaeological evidence of this practice in cave contexts (Awe et al. 2005; Heyden 1981: 22; Reents-Budet and MacLeod 1986; Sanmiguel 1994: 165). However, attributing all mutilated skeletal material to sacrifice may be an oversimplification of complex funerary practices (McAnany et al. 1999: 129; Nelson et al. 1992).

Archaeologists working in caves feel that human sacrifices are best evidenced where remains of children are found, where bodies were placed in wet passages that would make unlikely burial locations (Brady 1989: 362–3) or where remains show signs of ‘violent death’ (Pendergast 1971: 18), though even these levels of generalization may be unsupportable. At Bats’ub data suggest that a fully articulated, albeit decapitated, burial was treated reverentially and was accompanied by artifacts that imply social status, suggesting some demise other than sacrifice.

Burial of religious specialists: a shaman?

Cave use is largely restricted to specific classes of ritual specialists who traffic with Earth Lords on the behalf of clients or communities (Prufer 2005). It remains a possibility that the individual interred in the cave may have been a religious specialist, and there is limited information to support this. Caves are portals to a region of Maya worldview that could be regarded as a liminal space between living and the dead. They are quintessential locations for negotiating relationships with revered, and dead, ancestors who journey to or through the sacred mountain as part of their road after life (Nash 1970: 203; Prufer 2005; Thompson 1975: xxxiii).

Relationships with ancestors likely formed a primary motivation behind reverential mortuary practices (Gillespie 2001: 70–1; McAnany 1995). People wish to maintain favorable relationships with those who have crossed a boundary into a space that controls the animate. Across Mesoamerica people shared a view of this boundary between life and death as a ‘permeable membrane rather than an unbreachable chasm’ (McAnany et al. 1999: 126), and one that can be mediated, often with the assistance of trained specialists.

The interred may have been a feared individual, such as a religious specialist, who was decapitated post mortem and sealed in the cave to ensure the protection of the living. Many Maya today view caves as dangerous places where men can become trapped by the actions of shamans or Earth Gods. Among the Tzotzil, dangerous ‘thrower of illness’ shamans, or *h’ak’*

chamel h'ilol, keep small shrines in caves where they invoke spells that cause illness. They also sometimes recite prayers to sell the 'inner soul' of an individual to the Earth Owner, an underworld god. The soul can be released only if a shaman makes a pilgrimage to a sacred cave in order to convince the Earth Owner to release the inner soul (Vogt 1990: 122–3). Another Tzotzil account discusses a man who ventured to a cave to gain audience with an Earth God. At the cave he is advised to sit down but refuses, noting, 'if he should sit down he would remain magically stuck there forever' (Gossen 1974: 294). For the Chontol of Oaxaca, caves are especially feared places, the location where rituals of dubious nature are performed, and anyone seen entering a cave is suspected of partaking in witchcraft (Turner 1972: 71). Caves can also be interpreted as places in which socially 'good' shamans can confine evil. A contemporary Itzá Maya story recounts the trapping of a ferocious mythical human-eating beast, *Ah Boo*, in a cave. In the narrative a shaman creates a lake in the mouth of the cave where the beast dwells, fashioned by leaving a new plate of water at the cave entrance, and places threads across the cave mouth. When the beast tries to leave:

It arrives at the mouth of the cave, it sees a lake formed at the mouth of the cave, and it wants to arrive, to get out of the water. It is stuck with the thread placed by the old man . . . and there, it sees it can't get out, it returns again, inside his cave.

(Hofling 1991: 185–92)

It is the placing of a magical obstacle (in this case the thread) that prevents the beast from exiting the cave. It is plausible that obstacles such as a stone wall may have been intended to prevent undesirable forces from exiting caves. These accounts raise the specter that a powerful and respected, yet feared individual may, after death, have been sealed in the cave, complete with elaborate burial furniture.

The decapitation of the interred and the subsequent placement of the skull in the individual's lap and the replacement of the head with an olla was a very specific event for which there exist few corollaries. Among the Tzeltal Maya of Chiapas, actual or perceived practitioners of witchcraft may wind up victims of community-sanctioned homicide (Nash 1967, 1970: 244–50). Often, the killing of suspected witches is accompanied by removal of the head and, in one case, by the driving of a nail into the jaw of the victim (Nash 1967: 457). This practice may be related to mitigating the power of speech of a shaman, whose soul resides in the tongue, which is in turn the location of the power of shamanic individuals (Nash 1967; Furst 1995). These practices can potentially be seen as means to avoid or otherwise lessen the possibility of retribution by powerful enemies who, as deceased individuals, are now directly involved in forces related to the underworld.

Elements of the burial may be replicating a Maya creation myth, the Popul Vuh, where the hero-twin Hunapu and his father Hun Hunapu are variously decapitated and rejoined with their heads while competing with the Lords of the Underworld (Tedlock 1985). The hero-twins are classic trickster-shamans able to negotiate the underworld cavescape and reanimate their decapitated kin. At Bats'ub the removal of the head and its replacement with the olla may have been meant to recapitulate this mythic event or reflect a common underlying symbolic belief, possibly to signify the confinement of the individual.

Additionally, if the placement of the olla was meant to signify a replacement of the head of the individual, then the presence of a single jadeite bead in the vessel also may have

significance. Jadeite and greenstone beads and pendants have been recovered from the mouth of a skull near the site of Santa Anna, Honduras (Blom et al. 1934: 14), and inside skulls at Kamaniljuyú (Tozzer 1941: 130), Altar de Sacraficios (Smith 1972: 220) and Piedras Negras (Coe and Coe 1959: 133). Thompson quotes the nineteenth-century writings of Father J. Roman e Zamora who reports that in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, what is likely jade was placed in the 'mouth of the deceased ruler, either at the moment he was breathing his last or immediately after death to receive his soul' and that these stones were carefully guarded and curated for later ritual use (Thompson 1939: 283). In central Mexico adding a green stone to a funeral bundle was a metaphor for sustaining the vitality of the heart and may also have served to protect the living from actions of the dead (Furst 1995: 75).

In the Bats'ub example, removing the head and replacing it with a surrogate containing an item that may have served to neutralize supernatural power would have been a highly effective means of circumscribing the perceived influence of the deceased. In the seventeenth century Diego de Landa described the placement of stones in the mouth of the deceased as representing 'money, so that they should not be without something to eat in the other life', though he also reported that when a sorcerer died he was buried with 'some of his stones for witchcraft and the instruments of his profession' (Tozzer 1941: 130). The placement of a bead in an individual's mouth seems congruent with both reverential treatment and with protecting the living from a possibly feared individual.

Among the Mam, ritual specialists (*chimanes*) are not buried with the rest of the people but are placed in boxes on the surface of the cemetery. This is because the chiman has a pact with the *dueño de cerro*: an earth lord. Because of this pact, 'his house, when he dies, is in another place from that of other people'. His possessions, including his stool and gourds, must be ritually disposed of by an apprentice *chiman* atop an ancient pyramid (Oakes 1951: 51). The imagery on the polychrome ceramic vessel, including the presence of sacred bundles and reclining death figures, is clearly shamanic, as are the conflated anthropomorphic/zoomorphic depictions on the two shoe pots, discussed above. Among the K'ichee' Maya gourds akin to those for consumption of cacao are an integral component in the initiation of shamans. The linking of the new shaman to the ritual bundles is considered analogous to a marriage, and accompanied by the offering of the vessels (Tedlock 1992a: 173–4). The apprentice becomes bound to his or her bundles of divining equipment, which manifest as various paraphernalia during the day but as a person of the opposite sex at night during dreaming. The roles of ritual specialists may have figured strongly in activities surrounding a burial in such a remote cave, many kilometers from the nearest settlements, and the elaborate behavior that must have surrounded the removal of the head, the burning of incense in the chamber and the sealing of the cave.

Discussion

Bats'ub/25 Flight Cave was likely selected for a specific one-time private mortuary ritual that was performed in the dark zone. Once the ritual was completed the burial chamber was sealed and there is no evidence that the cave was reused. The execution of such a ritual would have required careful planning, acquisition of materials and the transportation of the body and offerings to the cave site, a difficult task in the broken karst terrain. Once at

the site, the size of the cave would have precluded more than two or three persons from occupying the burial chamber at any given time. This situation would have been further exacerbated by the presence of smoke from burning pine and copal, which probably would greatly have restricted the amount of time a person could remain in the burial chamber.

The region around Bats'ub appears to have been a favored location for cave burials. In 1996 nine caves were documented in the Unión Camp area, four of which were used as gravesites, two with diagnostic Early Classic ceramics. The other two mortuary caves were looted though they had similar modifications with rooms that were once sealed. These caves are all located within one kilometer of Bats'ub Cave. Certainly the presence of thousands of caves in the Maya Mountains made the larger region one of special significance to pre-Columbian residents. Population dynamics during the Early Classic may also have influenced the selection of these caves for mortuary activity. The residents of Uxbenká, the nearest Early Classic community to Bats'ub Cave (Fig. 1), were part of a population expansion rooted in the central Petén (Prufer et al. 2008). Foot travel between Uxbenká and Petén would likely have passed near Unión Camp (Ower 1923). Early Classic settlers, having moved into a new region distant from the remains of their ancestors and not yet having established strong lineage ties to the region, may have resorted to interring the remains of their elites or shamans in caves.

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